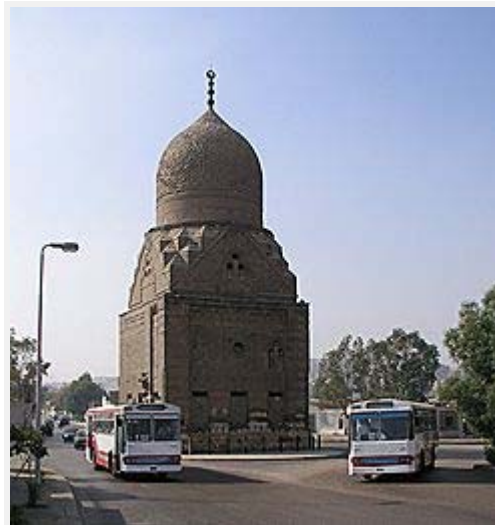


Beyond Life and Shortcuts

From the city of the dead in Cairo

"**Shortcut?**" asked the taxi driver while looking for a new cassette of the legendary Oum Kalthoum. I answered yes while the black cassette player threatened to eat the cassette he just had selected from his unorganized collection. Then, to the relief of both of us the song "Elf Leila wa leila" (*thousand and one night*) started to fill the taxi.



In the middle of the road, city of the dead Cairo.
[See larger photo](#)

Between two autostradas was our "shortcut road" - and in the middle of this road a beautiful monument. A domed building standing proud in a city of exhaust, dreams and legends. Built in medieval times for a lovely woman from the ruling class - well she just had to have been beautiful to match such a monument?

Passed this monuments often on my way from Heliopolis to downtown, but next day I knew all would change somehow. The monument in the middle of the road would then turn into the *entrance* to nothing less than the "**City of the Dead, Cairo!**"



One of the small alleys in Qarafa, city of the dead Cairo.

[See larger photo](#)

City of the Dead or the **Qarafa** Cemetery has become famous through many newspaper and television reportages focusing on the people living here among tombs and monuments. But to understand the importance of this area of Cairo, let's give a short background:

When general Amr ibn al-As in 639 AD came to Egypt with his army and the teaching of Islam, it was seven years after the death of Prophet Mohamed. Ancient Egypt became part of the Islamic empire after having been ruled the last three hundred years by the East Roman Empire.

There was no Cairo as we know it, the ancient capital Memphis was located among pyramids on the west bank of the Nile and on the east bank was legendary On (*Heliopolis*).

Between Memphis and On, directly on the east side of the Nilebank at a strategic junction between the Nile Valley and the Delta the Roman fortress Babylon was located. After the Romans were defeated the Arabs put up their garrison city Al-Fustat (*the Entrenched Camp*) just north of Babylon.



Sufihostel, Sultan al Ashraf Barsbay, 1432 AD (835 AH). Nearest is the tomb of Amir Qurqamas. [See larger photo](#)

An area close to Muqattam Hills (*north of today's Citadel*) was chosen as cemetery for Al-Fustat and it soon covered an area that was over six kilometres long. When the Fatmids came to Egypt in year 969 they established the fortified royal enclosure Al-Qahira (*the Subduer or the Victorious*) that was the start of what is Cairo today.

Later important Sufi orders choose the area outside Al-Qahira for their spiritual seeking and when important Sufi Sheikhs was buried close to the settlement these tombs became places for pilgrimages.



A "temple-cat" inside the sufihostel of Sultan al Ashraf Barsbay, city of the dead Cairo. [See larger photo](#)

Qarafa (*the city of the dead*) became a real important burial ground during the Bahri Mamluks (1250-1382) and Circassian Mamluks (1382-1517).

Mamluks in Arabic mean "possessed" and the Mamluks was slave soldiers coming

from Turkey and Black Sea area brought to Egypt as young boys. Then raised in the household of the sultan. When they reached maturity they were freed and remained the sultans loyal advisors and lifeguards, a kind of elite army so to say.

The last Ayyubid sultan died when the Sixth Crusade invaded Egypt, and his wife Shaggarat El Dorr took control and the Mamluks captured the French king in 1250. Shaggarat El Dorr marry later the Mamluk leader As-Salih and becomes the first (*and only*) Muslim Sultana. Her story could fill books, but important here is that from her death Egypt starts to be ruled by Mamluks. It's a strong area in Egypt's long history with its unique Mamluk architecture and the City of the Dead is maybe the best place to witness the remains of this period.



Decoration inside one of the stone domes in Sultan Farag Ibn Barquq's sufihostel - 1411 AD (813 AH)

[See larger photo](#)

Please note:

Monuments in the City of the Dead Cairo is not accessible for tourist busses, and it's not advisable to go her without someone who know the City of the Dead well. The only real option through Qarafa is a walking tour together with a professional guide - so read the second part of this article and see more photo's of monument to understand what one can miss if one only follows the main tourist stream while in Cairo.

Surpassing Dreams

The area of Qarafa belong mostly to the period Egypt was under the **Burg Mamluk rulers**. The first dynasty of Mamluk rulers was called Bahri Mamluk as they lived on Rhoda Island and "bahr" meaning sea, water or river. "Burg" on the other side is the word for fortress which here indicates that they ruled from and lived at Salah El Din's citadel.

The first ruler of the Burg Mamluks was **Barquq**, a Circassian slave who first ruled through the Bahr Mamluk infant Naggi who was six years when Barquq usurped the throne in 1382 and established his dynasty.



View inside the Sufihostel from Sultan Faraq ibn Barquq, 1411 AD (813 AH)
[See larger photo](#)

Barquq was son of a non-educated farmer from the area of Don River, but when he grew up in Cairo the sultan made him a powerful Emir. He had to fight Mongols and the Turks, and was able to keep the country free from both occupation forces. When he dies in 1399 it was his 13-year-old son **Faraq ibn Barquq** who officially took over the rule of Egypt.

Several Emirs' was fighting for the position to rule though young Faraq, but when the Mongols defeated the Turkish army in 1412, this defeat had it's effect as far as Egypt.

In Damascus the Egyptian army lost the battle against the Mongolian army and Faraq was beheaded.

Let us mention in a sidenote that Faraq's "Master of the horses" who bore the name Emir Garkas El Khalili, was the one who in year 1400 established the Kahn (*marketplace*) of Khalili. Today the whole bazaar area here is known under his name: **Khan El Khalili**.



One of two minarets at Sultan Barquq's sufihostel, 1411 AD (813 AH).
[See larger photo](#)

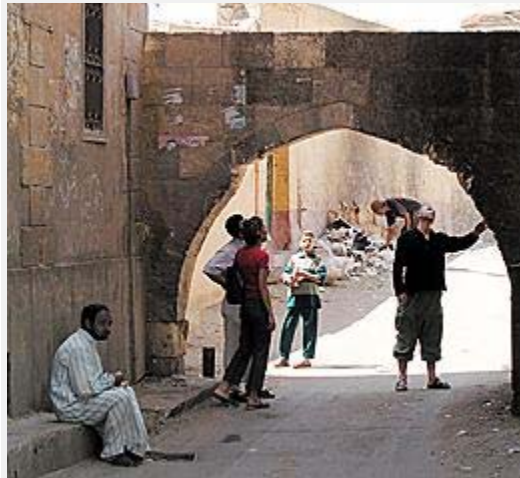
Ibn Khaldun who is considered one of the worlds first philosophers of history (*"hovering as giant over a tribe of pygmies" as George Sarton formulates it.*) - served two periods in Cairo as Chief of Justice, and was also among those who negotiated with the Mongolian army leader Timur Lenk in Damascus. It's Tunisian born Ibn Khaldun who describes Cairo of his time as follows: **"What one sees in dreams surpasses reality, but all that one could dream of Cairo falls short of the truth"**. He dies 75 years of age in his beloved Cairo in 1406.



View towards the Citadel from the top of the minaret of Sultan Qa'it Bay, 1474 AD (878 AH).
[See larger photo](#)

On [first page](#) of this article there is a photo of the Sufihostel (*Khanqah*) from the time of **Sultan Al Ashraf Barshbay** from 1432. The largest dome, attached to the mosque - hovers over the tomb of Sultan Barshbay. Barshbay is known to have defeated European pirates that had their base on Cyprus. These pirates had long made problems for the Muslim shipping in the eastern Mediterranean and in 1426 the sultan attacked and took their capital Nicosia. Barsbay then developed the business with India and Persia, something that provided him with a large wealth and it's said that he used most of this fortune on new buildings in Cairo.

Sultan Qait Bay ruled from 1468 to 1496 and he was known for his strong taxation where one third of the country's production was taken as tax. He used most of the tax for buildings, not only new buildings but restoration of buildings from previous rulers. His hand stretched longer than Egypt, as he is known to have built and restored buildings in Syria and Arab countries.

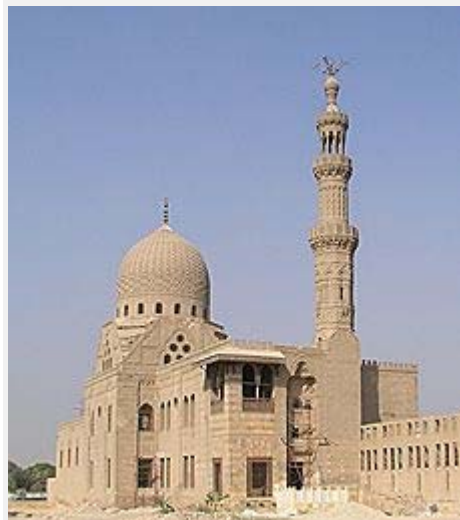


Walking tour, here under the gate of Sultan Qait Bay
1474 AD (878 AH)

[See larger photo](#)

Journeys takes Sultan Qait Bay all over Egypt, to Syria and all the way to Euphrates. Merchants from Venice, Genoa and Catalonia had to come to him as he controlled the spice trade between the Orient and Europe. When the Portuguese found the sea route to India around Africa, the capital of the spice trade move from Cairo to Lisbon.

During the last years of Qait Bay's reign, a great plague swept through Cairo and it's recorded that on one day only, 12000 people died. His only wife and daughter died as well, and in deep sorrow he passes away in 1496, over 80 years old.



The mosque of Amir Qurqumas
1507 AD (912 AH)

[See larger photo](#)

Emir **Qurqumas** was originally a Mamluk under Sultan Qait Bay, but rose in rank to "Atabeg" (*Commander in-Chief*) during the rule of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri - one of the last Mamluk rulers in Egypt. Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri admired Qurqumas for his benevolence, integrity and modesty and it's said that when he died 60 years old in 1510, the whole of Cairo went into mourning. His tomb is found in what today is known as the "Eastern cemetery", but on our walk we will be able to see his beautiful mosque complex.



Interior of the Mosque of Sultan Qua'it Bay
1474 AD (879 AH)

[See larger photo](#)

Sultan Qait Bay is followed by **Sultan Tuman Bay** who later loses the battle against the Ottoman army in 1516.

Egypt becomes a part of the Ottoman Empire under the new sultan, Selim the Grim - and Turman Bay becomes the last of the Mamluk rulers of Egypt.

Our walk in the City of the Dead is **not** over - that is not possible before we have visited the legendary **tomb of Khedive Tawfik** and his family.

Rags, Riches & Fairy Tales

Coming out of the narrow alley after the gate of Sultan Qait Bay, we are back in a bit larger street. Further east runs the Nasr autostrada filled with cars in both direction - and before this a rusty portal.

The gate is open and we pass two red old cars, which we hardly notice as it further in is a beautifully designed cupola above the trees and palms.



A rusty portal, and behind an unknown gem in Cairo.
[See larger photo](#)

Until just a few months ago this place was closed to the public, but lucky us - now it's open. Well, who would know? No tourist flocks, or even individual travellers around - still its one of the most important pearls of Cairo that's located in this garden of past glory.

This is the funeral complex of **Khedive Tawfik** and his family, and let us explain who this is before we enter the monument.

Tawfik's father, **Khedive Ismail** - the extravagant reformer, was the person who stood behind the building of the Suez Channel. With this followed the grand opening of the Suez channel which again was described by the author Henrik Ibsen in following words:

"9th of October 1869 - The Suez Canal, the new trade gate should be inaugurated. Khedive Ismail, Vice-King of Egypt, had invited guests from all European countries. I was among them and can verify a hospitality with riches from fairy tales".

"Riches from fairy tales" for sure! Some years later it's recorded that Khedive Ismail had a debt to European creditors of £ 80 million. To quote from Alan Moorehead's classical book "The White Nile":

"Baring and his colleagues, with the backing of their European governments, had supervised the final sinking of the Khedive with diplomatic skill. The Sultan in Constantinople, who was still the nominal overlord of Egypt, was induced to send Ismail a telegram in which he addressed him as the 'ex-Khedive' and informed him that his eldest son Tewfik had succeeded to his place".



The tomb of Khedive Tawfik and his family.

[See larger photo](#)

The humiliation of Khedive Ismail by Europe and the Ottoman Sultan undermined the authority of his son Khedive Tawfik who ruled from 1879. During his time the first popular nationalist movement surfaced in Egypt via the Egyptian colonel **Ahmed Urabi**.

In 1881 a revolt against foreign control made Khedive Tawfik to appoint Urabi as Secretary of War. But the nationalists wanted more control, among others with the foreign debt. The Khedive's power started to fade in face of the popular nationalist movement.



Do look up when you enter!

[See larger photo](#)

During the summer of 1882 the national movement rose as a threat for England and France, afraid that Urabi would default the debt and threaten Britain's control of the important link to India through via the Suez channel. In the end British troops was sent to the Suez channel area and defeated the national movement - and Khedive Tawfik placed himself under British protection. He was succeeded by his oldest son Khedive Abbas I.

The British occupation would hold a firm grip on Egypt until the revolution in 1952 sent both British rule and the Egyptian kingdom out of the country.

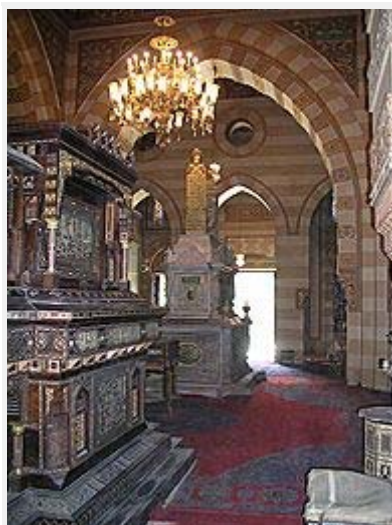


Tomb of Bambah Qadin, mother of Abbas I Pasha.

[See larger photo](#)

The tomb was originally built as a mausoleum for the mother of Abbas I Pasha and was enlarged in 1881 for Khedive Tawfik and his family. Above the entrance, Mamluk stalactite decoration is found. Inside the door on each wall, parts of the gold woven cover of the holy Kabah in Mecca. The story goes that some tried to replace these with copies some years ago, and that's part of the reason the mausoleum was closed for a longer period.

Further inside is the white marble tomb of Bambah Qadin, and behind this the tomb of Khedive Tawfik. His tomb is made of ebony inlaid with noble woods, ivory and mother-of-pearl.



Tomb of Khedive Twafik and Bambah Qadin

[See larger photo](#)

Behind these two tombs, three other tombs are found in the end of the room. In the middle the tomb of Princess Aminah, the wife of Khedive Tawfik and on each side her

two sons.

On the left side of Princess Aminah, the white marble tomb of her firstborn, Khedive Abbas II is found - and on the right the tomb of Prince Muhammed Ali. Muhammed Ali married the French actress Susanne Herson. He was a great art collector and built the Manyal Palace at Rodha Island to house these treasures. On the northeast wall there are other tombs, and on the opposite wall the family library.



Scarecrow - or a very local guide?

[See larger photo](#)

On the way out from this last tomb so filled with recent history, we met a ragged scarecrow standing there so humanly alone in the garden. We had just walked through hundreds of years with important history normally not presented visitors to Cairo.

Okay, nobody would dream about forgetting the pyramids and Egypt's pharaonic history; still it would be a **great** pity if this part of Egypt were not available to visitors. If you would like to follow in the footsteps of this article, do let us know and we will help you to arrange a walking tour in a Cairo that surpass dreams.

Talking about dreaming, I had the feeling when a friend stood there talking to the lone scarecrow, that this was not a normal scarecrow... Maybe it was a ragged guide that in moonlight changed into its royal costume and became a guide for those who rest here, those who this area was intended for? Please have a look for yourself when you get here?